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Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Atheist



by

Marquis de Sade

See Sharp Press

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by

Marquis de Sade

See Sharp Press ♦ Tucson, Arizona ♦ 1997

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For this edition, I've reproduced the type from the Haldeman-Julius little book, but I've blown it up to 130% of its original size to increase its readability.

I hope that this pamphlet not only introduces readers to an aspect of de Sade's work of which they might not have been aware, but that it also introduces them to an important and now nearly forgotten page from the history of radical publishing in America.

—Chaz Bufe, August 1997

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DIALOGUE BETWEEN A PRIEST AND A DYING ATHEIST

THE DEATH OF A MAN INSPIRES A SOMBER
GENIUS

[From an unpublished manuscript edited with an
introduction and note by Maurice Heins. Trans-
lated for Pascal Covati by Samuel Pateman.]

FOREWORD

*"Religion, throughout the greater part of its history,
has been a form of 'holy' terrorism . . . wherever
there is devout belief, there is also the
inseparable feeling of fear."*

—E. Haldeman-Julius

Publisher's Note

During its day, the original publisher of this pamphlet, the Haldeman-Julius Company of Grand, Kansas, was the most important progressive publishing company in the United States. From the founding of his company in 1919 until his death in 1961, E. Haldeman-Julius published more than 2500 books and pamphlets, many written by anarchists, atheists, and socialists. According to one report, sales of Haldeman-Julius's cheaply priced books and pamphlets reached into the hundreds of millions, though that estimate seems a bit over optimistic.

In addition to radical literature, the Haldeman-Julius Company published a wide variety of books and pamphlets, including works by Peter B. Kropotkin, Leo Tolstoy, Clarence Darrow, Robert Ingersoll, and many others. These works were published at a very low price, making them accessible to a large number of people.

Haldeman-Julius managed to print his books at a price which he was able to sell for 20¢ or 30¢, a price which was a profit in itself. When he called his "Little Blue Books" were 3 1/2" x 5 1/2" pamphlets printed on very cheap paper and set in 8-point type. (This is 2-point type.) Even so, they were still an incredible bargain. Haldeman-Julius also produced larger pamphlets and books which were somewhat better produced, but still cheaply priced.

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—Chris Burke, August 1997

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DIALOGUE BETWEEN A PRIEST AND A DYING ATHEIST

THE DEATH OF A MAN INSPIRES A SOMBER GENIUS

[From an unpublished manuscript edited with an introduction and note by Maurice Heine. Translated for Pascal Covici by Samuel Putnam.]

FOREWORD

The Atheist is the man of nature.—SYLVAIN
MARÉCHAL.

The little work of the Marquis de Sade which we here publish for the first time is possessed of a double interest for the curious: it is, of his literary works at present known, the earliest of those that we are able to date with certitude (1782), as well as the only one written in the same dialogue form as the *Philosophie dans le Boudoir*. It is generally known that the original edition of the latter bears the date of 1795: the absence of any manuscript renders uncertain the date at which it was first written. Between these two works, there has been little appreciable change except in political systems:

in the interval, the Revolution has made a citizen of the marquis. Here, however, it is well not to be deceived: the patriotic and royalist tirade of the dying man and the republican and anarchistic proclamation of the chevalier may represent at bottom — *mutatis mutandis* — but one and the same oratorical precaution. It is, as a matter of fact, not so much politics that is treated in these two essays on metaphysics and morality, and particularly, atheism and the philosophy of eroticism. But this latter theme, which constitutes the sole burden of the "Philosophy" is barely indicated in the "Dialogue," now under consideration.

The unpublished manuscript from which we obtain the text of the "Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Atheist" is in the form of a brochure with a cover, consisting of twenty-three uncut sheets of blue laid paper, covered on both sides with the handwriting (so per-

sonal in character) of the Marquis de Sade. It consisted originally of twenty-four sheets, that is, of six sheets of foolscap size, folded in quarto form and bound into a single booklet, measuring approximately six by eight inches.

At the bottom of page forty-seven, on the recto of the last sheet, there appears, in the outer margin, an important autograph notation: "Finished the 12th of July, 1782." It was, then, in the beginning of his forty-third year, at the end of third year of his detention by warrant in the Château de Vincennes, that Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade composed this work as we find it in his waste-book. The handwriting is firm and clear, with few erasures. The present edition respects the original text, except in case of an obvious *lapsus calami*.

If we rely upon the touching testimony of his friend, La Lande, Maréchal was not guilty of the supreme madness of a death contrary to his vows. And De Sade himself, so different in character, must have given proof, in the presence of death, of an equally tranquil assurance.

MAURICE HEINE.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN A PRIEST AND A DYING ATHEIST

The Priest.—Now that you have come to that fatal moment when the veil of illusion is rent only to permit straying man a sight of the cruel picture of his errors and his vices, do you not repent, my child, the many mis-demeanors you have been led to commit through weakness and human fragility?

The Dying Man.—Yes, my friend, I repent.

The Priest.—Ah, then, profit from that happy remorse by obtaining from Heaven, during the brief interval that remains to you, a general absolution of your sins, and remember that it is only through meditation on the most blessed sacrament of penitence that it will be possible for you to obtain the gift of eternal life.

The Dying Man.—I do not understand you, any more than you have understood me.

The Priest.—What!

The Dying Man.—I told you that I repented.

The Priest.—I heard you.

The Dying Man.—Yes, but without understanding.

The Priest.—What do you mean?

The Dying Man.—Just this Since I have been created by nature with very lively tastes, with very strong passions, and have been placed in this world for the sole purpose of giving myself over to, and satisfying, those tastes and passions, and since these consequences of my having been created are, merely, necessities in keeping with the first designs of nature, or, if you prefer, essential corollaries of her plans for me, the whole being in accordance with her own laws, I repent not having sufficiently recognized her omnipotence, and the only remorse I feel has to do with the mediocre employment I have made of those faculties (criminal according to you, wholly natural according to me) which she gave me for her own service: I have, at times, resisted her, and for this I am penitent. Blinded by the absurdities of your doctrines, I have combated, for the sake of those doctrines, the violence of those desires which I received by an inspiration a good deal more divine, and this I repent: I have reaped only flowers, when I might have gathered an ample harvest of fruit there you have the

just cause of my regret; please do me the honor not to suppose there is any other cause.

The Priest.—Oh, where are those errors, those sophistries of years, leading you? You impute to the thing created all the power of the Creator, and this unfortunate tendency, which leads you astray is, though you will not see it, simply the result of that corrupt Nature which you endow with omnipotence.

The Dying Man.—My friend, it appears to me your dialectic is as false as your mind itself. I wish you would either reason more justly or leave me to die in peace. What do you mean by "creator," and what do you understand by "corrupt Nature"?

The Priest.—The Creator is the master of the universe; it is He who has made everything, created everything, and who preserves everything, as the simple consequence of His omnipotence.

The Dying Man.—He's quite a chap, upon my word! Ah, well, tell me, then, why it is that this fellow, who is so powerful, still has created, according to you, a Nature that is corrupt.

The Priest.—What merit would men have had, if God had not left them a free choice, and if they had not encountered, upon the earth, the possibility either of doing good or of avoiding evil?

The Dying Man.—And so, that god of yours must do everything crosswise, solely for the purpose of tempting, or of proving, his creature? He did not know his own creature, then? He doubted the result?

The Priest.—He undoubtedly knew what the result would be, but He wished to leave man the merit of choice.

The Dying Man.—Of what use was that, since he knew what the choice would be? Why, if he is all-powerful, as you say—why did he not keep man in the right path and force him to choose the good?

The Priest.—Who can fathom the immense and infinite-wisdom of God towards man, and who can understand all that we behold?

The Dying Man.—The one who simplifies things, my friend, the one, above all, who does not multiply causes in order to confuse effects the more. What need have you of a second difficulty, when you cannot explain the first; and since it is possible that Nature alone has done all that you attribute to your god, why must you go seeking a master for her? The cause of what you do not understand is, it may be, the simplest thing in the world. Perfect your physics, and you will understand Nature

better; purify your reason, banish your prejudices, and you will have no need of that god of yours.

The Priest.—Poor fellow! I believe you are nothing more than a Socinian. I have arms to fight you, but I see clearly that you are an atheist, and since your heart refuses the infinite and authentic proofs we every day receive of the existence of the Creator, I have nothing more to say to you. One does not give light to a blind man.

The Dying Man.—My friend, you must grant me one point: the blinder of us is, surely the one who puts a bandage over his eyes, not the one who snatches the bandage away. You build up, you invent, you multiply; as for me, I destroy, I simplify. You pile error upon error, while I combat all errors. Which is the blinder of the two?

The Priest.—You have no belief whatever, then, in God?

The Dying Man.—None. And for a very simple reason, namely, that it is utterly impossible for me to believe what I do not understand. Between comprehension and faith, there should be a direct relation; comprehension is the first food of faith: where there is no comprehension, faith is dead, and those who, in such a case, pretend to have faith, are self-impostors. I defy you, yourself, to believe in the god you preach to me—because you cannot demonstrate him to me, because the power is not in you to define him for me, because, in short, you do not understand him. And since you do not understand him, you are unable to furnish me with any reasonable argument. In a word, whatever is beyond the limits of the human mind is a chimera or a futility, and your god can be only one or the other of these things. In the former case, I should be a fool to believe in him; in the latter, an imbecile. My friend, prove to me the inertia of matter, and I will grant you your creator; prove to me that Nature is not sufficient to herself, and I will permit you to assume that she must have a master. Until that time, look for nothing from me: I only yield to evidence, and I receive evidence only through my senses: where they stop, my faith is powerless. I believe in the sun because I see it; I conceive it to be the unifying center of all the inflammable material in Nature; its periodical revolution pleases, without astonishing, me. It is an operation of physics, as

simple, possibly, as that of electricity, but one which it is not permitted us to understand. What need have I to go further? When you shall have built me a scaffolding for your god above all that, shall I be any the further along, and will it not require quite as much effort to understand the workman as to define the work? As a consequence, you do me no service by setting up your edifying chimera; you have troubled my mind, but you have not enlightened it, and I owe you nothing but hatred as compensation. Your god is a machine which you have manufactured to serve your own passions; it moves at their direction, but when it interferes with my own passions, grant me the right to overthrow it. And so, at the moment when my weakened soul has need of philosophic calm, please do not come to terrify it with your sophistries, which frighten without convincing, which irritate without improving. This soul, my friend, is what Nature has willed it should be, that is to say, the result of those organs and their needs which she has been pleased to create for me. And since she has equal need of virtues and of vices, when it has pleased her to impel me to the former, she has done so; when she would impel me to the latter, she does it by inspiring in me certain desires; and I, likewise, have surrendered to these. Do not seek beyond her laws for the sole cause of all human inconsistency; and in her laws, look for no other principles than her own volition and her own needs.

The Priest.—Then everything in the world is inevitable.

The Dying Man.—Assuredly.

The Priest.—But if everything is inevitable, then everything must be regulated.

The Dying Man.—Has any one denied that?

The Priest.—And what could regulate everything that is, except an all-powerful and all-wise hand?

The Dying Man.—Is it necessary for powder to blaze when one touches fire to it?

The Priest.—Yes.

The Dying Man.—And what wisdom do you find in that?

The Priest.—None.

The Dying Man.—It is, then, possible that there are certain things which are necessary, without any wisdom being involved; and it follows that it is also possible for all things to derive from a first cause, without there being either reason or wisdom in that first cause.

The Priest.—What point are you trying to make?

The Dying Man.—I am proving to you that everything may be as it is, and as you see it to be, without any wise and reasonable cause, and that natural results must have natural causes, without need of supposing unnatural ones, such as your god would be who, as you already have admitted, stands in need of explanation, without himself being able to furnish any: I would prove to you, as a consequence, that your god is good for nothing and absolutely useless; and since there is every evidence that what is useless is non-existent, I have need, in order to convince myself of the fact that your god is a chimera, of no other reasons than those furnished me by the certainty I possess of his futility.

The Priest.—If you are off on that foot, it seems to me there is little use in speaking to you of religion.

The Dying Man.—Why not? Nothing amuses me like evidence of the excessive fanaticism and imbecility of which men can be guilty on this score; there are, for me, some mistakes so prodigious that the contemplation of them, however horrible the picture, is always interesting. Answer my questions frankly, and above all, banish egotism. If I were so weak as to permit myself to be taken in by those ridiculous beliefs of yours concerning the fabled existence of a being who makes religion necessary, under what form should you advise me to render him my tribute of worship? Would you have me adopt the dreams of Confucius rather than the absurdities of Brahma? Should I adore the great serpent of the Africans, the star of the Peruvians or Moses' god of armies? What sect of Mahomet would you have me join, or which of the Christian heresies would, in your eyes, be preferable? Look well to your answer.

The Priest.—Can there be any doubt about my answer?

The Dying Man.—There you have the perfect egotist.

The Priest.—No. It is merely because I love you as much as I do myself that I advise you in accordance with what I believe.

The Dying Man.—We must love ourselves very little if we listen to such errors.

The Priest.—Ah, who could be so blind as not to be convinced by the miracles of our divine Redeemer?

The Dying Man.—One who sees in him only the most ordinary of all knaves and the shallowest of impostors.

The Priest.—Ye Gods! Who hear him, yet do not strike him dead!

The Dying Man.—No, my friend, all is at peace, because that god of yours, whether divine impotence or divine reason, or all that you would have him be—though I do not for a moment admit his existence, except out of condescension toward you or, if you prefer, to lend myself the better to your narrow views—because, I say, that god, if he did exist, as you are foolish enough to believe, would never, to convince us of his existence, have adopted means so ridiculous as those your Jesus supposes.

The Priest.—And what of the prophets, the miracles, the martyrs—are they not all proof?

The Dying Man.—How can you, logically, expect me to accept as proof all that which in itself stands in need of proof? For prophecy to be a proof, it would be necessary, first of all, for me to be absolutely certain the prophecy had been made; but all that being a matter of history, it can possess for me no greater validity than all the other facts recorded in history, three-fourths of which are very doubtful. If I add to this the more than likely possibility that these prophecies have been handed down to me by interested historians, I shall be, as you see, more than justified in my doubt. Who will assure me, moreover, that such prophecies have not been made after the fact, that they are not the result of the simplest wisdom, such as that which discerns a happy reign under a just king or the fact that there is frost in winter? And if all this is so, how can you expect prophecy, which itself has so much need of proof, to become a proof to me? As to your miracles, they impose on me no more than do your prophecies. All knaves have performed them, and all fools have believed them. In order to be persuaded of the truth of a miracle, I should have to be convinced that the event which you call a miracle was one absolutely contrary to the laws of Nature, for only such an event could pass for a miracle. And who knows the laws of Nature well enough to be able to affirm the precise point at which they cease to function? It requires only two things to win credit for a miracle: a mountebank and a number of silly

women. Away with you, and never seek any other origin than that for those miracles of yours. All the new sectarians have performed miracles, and, what is strangest of all, they have all found imbeciles to believe them. Your Jesus has done nothing more singular than did Apollonius of Tyana, and yet, no one has thought of taking the latter for a god. As to your martyrs, they are, assuredly, the weakest of all your arguments. To make a martyr requires only enthusiasm and resistance, and since the opposite side affords me as many examples as your own, I shall never feel myself sufficiently authorized to believe that one side is better than the other, but shall be inclined, rather, to look on both with pity. Ah! my friend, if that god you preach did exist, would he have any need of miracles, of martyrs or of prophecy in establishing his empire? And if, as you say, the heart of man were his work, would it not be the sanctuary which he would choose as the abiding place of his law? That just law—it would have to be just, coming from a just god—would be ineffaceably engraved in the hearts of all, from one end of the universe to the other, and all men, through the delicate organ of conscience, would be brought to think and act alike, by reason of the common worship paid to the god of their being. All would have but one fashion of loving, adoring and serving him; and it would be as impossible for them not to recognize such a god as it would be to resist the inner impulse to worship him. What, in place of this, do I behold in the world? As many gods as there are countries, as many manners of serving those gods as there are different heads or different imaginations. And this multiplicity of opinions, among which it is physically impossible for me to choose, is, you would tell me, the work of a just god? Away with you, preacher. You outrage your own god by presenting him to me in such a manner. Permit me to deny him wholly, for if he exists, then I shall outrage him less by my incredulity than do you with your blasphemies. Be reasonable, Mr. Preacher. Your Jesus is worth no more than Mahomet, Mahomet no more than Moses, and all three no more than Confucius, who enunciated a few good principles, while the three others are unreasonable in their teachings; but in general, all fellows of that sort are but impostors, whom the philosopher laughs at, whom the mob believes, and whom the magistrate ought to string up by the neck.

The Priest.—Alas! They did it only too well for one of the four.

The Dying Man.—He was the one who best deserved it. He was seditious, rowdy, a slanderer, a knave, a libertine, a clown and a dangerous criminal; he possessed the art of imposing on the people, and he was, as a result, liable to punishment in a realm in the state Jerusalem was in at that time. They were therefore, very wise in getting rid of him, and ~~this is the only case in which my principles~~

very gently and tolerant otherwise, would admit the severity of Themis. I excuse all errors except those which may become dangerous to the government under which one lives. The majesty of kings, alone, impresses me: kings are the only ones whom I respect, and the man who does not love his country and his king is not fit to live.

The Priest.—But you must admit there is something after this life. It is impossible that your mind should not sometimes have endeavored to pierce the thick shadows of the fate that awaits us. And what doctrine could be more satisfying than the one which provides an infinity of pains for the evil and an eternity of rewards for the good?

The Dying Man.—How is that, my friend? The prospect of nothingness has never frightened me; I see in it only a consolation and something very simple. All the rest is the work of pride; there is reason only in this view. There is in nothingness nothing terrifying or absolute. Do I not have constantly under my eyes the example of the perpetual generative and regenerative work of nature? Nothing perishes, my friend; nothing in this world is destroyed: today, a man; tomorrow, a worm; the day after tomorrow, a fly—what is that, if not perpetual existence? And why would you have me rewarded for virtues when I can claim no merit in possessing them, or punished for crimes, when I am not the master of myself? Can you reconcile the goodness of your supposed god with such a doctrine, and could he have willed to create me merely to give himself the pleasure of punishing me, all as the consequence of a choice I have made when I was never free to choose.

The Priest.—But you are.

The Dying Man.—Yes, according to your prejudiced view; but reason destroys such preju-

dices, and the doctrine of human liberty was never invented except to spawn that doctrine of divine grace which is so favorable to your reveries. What man is there in the world who, seeing the scaffold beside his proposed crime, would commit that crime, if he were free not to do so? We are led on by an irresistible force, and never for a moment are we sufficiently masters of ourselves to be able to choose any other course than the one to which we are impelled. There is not a single virtue that is not necessary to nature, and inversely, not a single needless crime, and it is in the perfect equilibrium which nature maintains between the two that all her science lies. But can we, by any possibility, be guilty because we fall in the direction she pushes us? No more guilty than is the wasp that comes to sink its sting in your flesh.

The Priest.—Then, the greatest of crimes should inspire no terror in us.

The Dying Man.—That is not what I said. It is enough for the law to condemn and justice to punish; this is all that is needed to terrify and restrain us. But when, unfortunately, a crime has been committed, one should be wise enough to accept it and not to indulge in sterile remorse. Remorse is vain, since it can neither restrain us from crime nor repair a crime when it has been committed. It is, therefore, absurd to yield to remorse, and still more absurd to fear being punished in another world, if we are happy enough to have escaped punishment in this one. God forbid I should, by this, lend encouragement to crime. One, surely, should avoid doing this so far as one can, but it is through reason that crime is to be fled, and not through false fears, which lead to nothing, and which soon lose their effect in a soul possessed of any strength whatsoever. Reason, my friend—yes, reason alone should teach us that doing ill to our fellow men never can make us happy, while our hearts should tell us that to contribute to their felicity is the greatest privilege nature has given us upon this earth; all human morality is contained in this one precept: *to make others as happy as one would like to be oneself*, and never to do an ill to others that we should not want them to do to us. That, my friend, is the only principle we should follow, and there is need neither of religion nor of God in order to sense and admit such a code; all that is required is a good heart. . . . But I feel myself growing

weaker, Mr. Preacher. Forsake your prejudices, be a man, be human. Without fear and without hope, leave your gods and your religions. All that they are good for is to put a sword in the hand of man, and the very mention of all these horrors has caused more blood to be spilled upon the earth than all the other wars and all the other scourges, put together. Renounce the idea of another world; there is none; but do not renounce the pleasure of happiness, and of creating happiness, in this world. That is the only means nature offers you of repeating and of prolonging your existence. My friend, pleasure has always been to me the dearest of blessings; I have swung incense before her all my life, and I have always desired to die in her arms. My end is approaching. Six women, more beautiful than day, are in the next room. I have been keeping them for this moment. Take your share of them, and, in accordance with my example, endeavor to forget, upon their bosoms, all the vain sophistries of superstition and all the imbecile errors of hypocrisy.

NOTE

[*The Dying Man rings, the women enter, and the Preacher becomes, in their arms, a man corrupted by nature, for not having been able to explain what corrupt nature was.*]